

ANTHOLOGY OF KOREAN LITERATURE

*From Early Times to
the Nineteenth Century*

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HONOLULU

Princess Hyegyŏng (1735–1815)

from A RECORD OF SORROWFUL DAYS

[*Hanjung nok*]

That year [1743] an edict was issued, requiring families with eligible daughters to register them for selection. Someone said, "There will be no harm done if you don't register your daughter. A poor family like yours should be spared the burden of preparing the clothing required for the process." "No," replied Father. "We have been salaried officials for generations. I receive a stipend from the court, and my child is the granddaughter of the Minister of Rites. I dare not deceive the court." Father then registered me.

At the time, we were so poor there was no way for us to have a new wardrobe made. My skirt was sewn from fabric that had been stored away for the marriage of my deceased elder sister, and old material was used for linings. Even so, we had to borrow money. The image of Mother making every effort to complete the preparations still haunts me.

The first of the three sittings was held on the twenty-eighth day of the ninth month [November 13]. In spite of my inferior gifts, King Yŏngjo was extravagant with praise and the queen gazed steadily on me. The mother of the prince, Royal Consort Yi, beaming with happiness, summoned me before the ceremony and was very affectionate. When court women scrambled for seats, I was so embarrassed I could hardly think. When it was time to bestow royal gifts, Royal Consort Yi and her daughter, Princess Hwap'yŏng, noted my deportment and tried to correct my clumsiness, and I followed their instructions. I then left the palace for home and slept that night in Mother's arms.

Early the next morning Father came in and spoke anxiously to Mother. "What shall we do? Everyone seems sure our daughter will be the one favored." "We shouldn't have registered her," Mother whispered. "The daughter of a poor, unknown scholar." In my sleep I overheard their worried words and woke up crying. Recalling the kindness I had enjoyed at the palace, I was perplexed. Mother and Father tried to comfort me. "Do you think she understands?" they asked each other. I was deeply troubled in the period following the first sitting. Was it because I knew I would suffer many ups and

downs at court? On the one hand I felt strange, but on the other this sensation seemed truly to forebode what was to come.

Word of my rating after the first sitting brought a large number of clansmen to our home. Servants we had not seen for years returned as well. This taught me much about our private and social life.

The second sitting was held on the twenty-eighth day of the tenth month [December 13]. I was terribly frightened. Mother and Father too were worried; they hoped that by sheer chance I would not be selected. When I entered the palace grounds, however, I sensed that the choice had already been made; my temporary quarters had been refurbished, and I was treated with a new deference and respect. I lost my composure as I ascended to the royal presence. The king did not treat me as he did the other girls, but instead made his way past the beaded screen and began stroking me affectionately. "We've gained a beautiful daughter-in-law. We remember your grandfather well. When we had your father in audience, we were pleased because we knew we had gained a capable man. You are indeed his daughter!" His Majesty was most pleased. The queen and Royal Consort Yi were also pleased beyond words and showered me with affection. The princesses gathered around me, holding my hands, and they did not want to let me go. I remained a long while in a building called Kyŏngch'un Hall, and there a luncheon was served to me. A lady-in-waiting tried to remove my green jacket. I did not want to take it off, but she coaxed and cajoled me until I relented. After she took my jacket off she measured my various parts. I was so startled I fought back tears of humiliation until at last I mounted the palanquin to leave the palace; then I cried. The palanquin was carried by palace servants. In the street the rows of black-robed women servants charged with delivering royal messages were an eerie sight.

When we arrived home, I was carried through the gate reserved for male visitors. Father raised the screen covering the palanquin and lifted me out. He had on his ceremonial robe and seemed uneasy treating me with deference. I clung to my parents and could not hold back the tears. Mother too was attired in her ceremonial robes, and the table was decked with a scarlet cover. Mother appeared somewhat awe-stricken as she kowtowed four times before accepting the missive from the queen, and twice before accepting one from Lady Yi.

From that day on my parents began to use honorific expressions with me, and the elders of the clan treated me with respect—all this

made me feel uncomfortable and indescribably sad. Greatly apprehensive, Father gave me thousands of words of advice. I felt like a sinner who has no place of refuge. I did not want to leave Father and Mother. My heart felt as though it would melt away—nothing seemed to interest me.

Close relatives and distant clansmen wanted to see me before I entered the palace. Not a single relative failed to visit us. Distant ones were entertained in the courtyard. The important ones included my great-great-uncle from Yangju. One great-uncle remarked, "The palace is very strict. Once you enter its confines, we may not have the chance to meet again. Always respect your superiors and act with prudence. The letter *kam* in my name means 'mirror,' and *po* means 'help.' Keep this in mind after you have entered the palace." I seldom saw my great-uncle, so for some reason his words made me sad.

The third sitting was scheduled for the thirteenth day of the eleventh month [December 28]. With the passing of each day my grief grew more unbearable and I slept each night in Mother's arms. Father's sisters and his sister-in-law tried to comfort me; they stroked me tenderly and were unwilling to take their leave. Father and Mother caressed me night and day, losing several nights' sleep. Even today my heart chokes when I think of those final days.

Two court ladies appeared at our home the day after the second sitting. One of them was Lady-in-waiting Ch'oe, governess to the prince, and the other was Kim Hyo-dok, an overseer of the attendants. Unlike the others, Lady-in-waiting Ch'oe had a stern and imposing mien. Her family had served in the palace for generations, so she was conversant with the intricate court protocol and never made a blunder. Mother was cordial and made the two ladies feel welcome. They measured me for clothing and left. Lady-in-waiting Ch'oe returned before the third sitting, accompanied this time by Mun Taebok, another overseer. They presented me a gift of clothing from the queen—a formal dress jacket of green brocade, another of pine-pollen yellow with grape designs, and a third of lavender silk, along with a crimson satin skirt and a summer jacket of fine cambric.

I had never before owned such fine dresses and had never coveted the clothing of others. There was a girl my own age among our close relatives. Her family was wealthy and provided her with every possible item of clothing and toilette, but I never envied her. One day she came to visit wearing a gorgeous deep-red lined skirt with elaborate seams. Mother watched for a while, then asked me, "Would you like

to have a dress like that?" "If I owned one, I would surely wear it," I answered, "but I don't want one if we have to have it made." "You may be the daughter of an impoverished family," Mother said. "But when you marry, I'll make you a beautiful dress like that one as a remembrance of the maturity you displayed today." Before the third sitting, when it became evident that I was fated to marry the prince, Mother came to me in tears. "We couldn't afford to give you beautiful dresses, but I never forgot my promise to you. Though you will soon be entering the palace, where common costume is not allowed, I dearly wish to fulfill that promise to you." She made the skirt before the third sitting came, and grieved. When I wore it, I dissolved in tears.

I felt that it would be appropriate to bid farewell to the ancestors of my clan and to Mother's family, and I made my desire known. My wish was conveyed through the sister-in-law of Pak Myōng-wōn, who was married to Princess Hwap'yōng, to the mother of the princess, Royal Consort Yi. His Majesty was soon informed of my wish and commanded me to go.

Mother and I rode in the same palanquin and proceeded to the head house of the Hong clan, the house of a cousin of my father [Hong Sang-han]. Because he and his wife had no daughter, they had often invited me to come and stay with them. Their love for me was known to His Majesty, who ordered Hong Sang-han to help with the preparations for my marriage. After I was selected, he came and stayed with us. When Mother and I arrived at his home, his wife was delighted to see me. I was led up to the ancestral shrine to perform obeisances. Though it was customary for younger generations to perform the kowtows in the courtyard, I worshiped the spirits in the main hall of the house. I was stunned by the perquisites of my new status.

We then went to the home of Mother's family, where we were received by the wife of Mother's brother. She was pleased to see us and reluctant to let us go. On previous visits, my cousins took joy in giving me great hugs and in carrying me around on their backs. This time, however, they took pains to maintain a decorous distance and treated me with deference, which made me feel sad. I was particularly fond of one of my cousins, who later married into the Shin clan, and I was very sorry to take leave of her. On our way back home we stopped to pay our respects to Mother's two older sisters.

The days flew. Soon it was the twelfth day of the eleventh month.

That night Father's sisters led me outside. "Take a good look at your home, for it will be the last time," they urged me, as they led me by the hand into the bright moonlight. The chilly wind blew over the snow, and tears coursed down my cheeks. I lay awake the whole night.

The command summoning me came by messenger early the next morning, and I donned the formal dress provided by the queen. The wives of clansmen came to bid final farewells, and close relatives gathered to accompany me to the detached palace. We all went up to the ancestral shrine and performed a special service to inform the spirits of the great honor being bestowed on the family. Father struggled to hold back his tears as he intoned the prayer.

Parting was more than we could bear. I cannot find words adequate to describe the sorrowful scene.

I entered the palace compound, resting first at the Kyŏngch'un Hall before continuing on to the T'ongmyŏng Hall, where I was received in audience by the Three Majesties—the king, the queen, and Queen Dowager Inwŏn. It was the first time the queen dowager had seen me. "This girl is beautiful and looks very kind," she said. "She is a blessing to the kingdom." His Majesty patted me affectionately. "Our daughter-in-law is bright. We made a good choice." I cannot express in words the delight of the queen and the sincere affection of the Royal Consort Yi. Though of childish mind, I was grateful for the royal favor.

I freshened my makeup and changed into the ceremonial dress. After I had eaten, it was growing late; I performed the four kowtows to the Three Majesties and then left for the detached palace. His Majesty appeared in person at the place where I mounted my palanquin; he looked at me and took my hand. "We want you to be happy. We'll send you a copy of the *Lesser Learning*. Study it with your father and be happy until you return again to us." He favored me with his tender love.

Dusk settled and the lanterns were lit as I left the palace. Being surrounded by palace ladies, I was unable to sleep; I wanted Mother at my side. I was unhappy without her and could easily imagine how sadness must weigh heavily upon her heart. Lady-in-waiting Ch'oe, however, was strict and bereft of human feelings. She explained, "The laws of the kingdom do not allow you to stay on, My Lady," and with that, had sent Mother away, so that I was unable to get any sleep. There was no human being as inconsiderate as she!

The following day His Majesty sent me a copy of the *Lesser Learning*. I studied it every day with Father. The head of our clan was with us, as were Father's brothers, Hong In-han and Hong Chun-han, the latter a mere boy at the time. My oldest brother was also with us. The king sent a reader too, for me to peruse in my spare moments, one which His Majesty had written for Princess Hyosun when she married the former heir apparent.

My quarters were well appointed with furniture, curtains, folding screens, and toilette articles. Among these was a large Japanese pendant shaped like an eggplant. It was a gift from Royal Consort Yi and had once belonged to Princess Chŏngmyŏng—daughter of King Sŏnjo—who had married my great-great-grandfather. She had presented the pendant to her granddaughter, who had married into the Cho clan. Either the family sold it, or it had fallen into the hands of the family of a lady-in-waiting who attended the royal consort. Now I, a descendant of the princess, was again in possession of a family heirloom that had once belonged to her. Surely this was more than mere chance.

My grandfather was a lover of art and had owned an embroidered screen in four panels. After he passed away [1740], one of his servants sold the screen. Later, Royal Consort Yi purchased it from a relative of one of her attendants, had it remounted, and gave it to me to put up in my bedroom. When my aunt visited me she recognized the screen at once. "This is most strange," she said. "An object owned by your grandfather has found its way into the palace and now stands in his granddaughter's bedroom!"

Another gift from the royal consort was her own eight-panel dragon screen. Father was astonished when he saw it. "The dragon on this screen is just like one that appeared in a dream I had the night before you were born [August 5, 1735] . . ." The dragon's black scales were highlighted with gold thread so that the gold and black intermingled. Father mused, "This dragon is not completely black, but otherwise it's exactly like the dragon of my dream." Everyone marveled at the return of grandfather's screen and the similarity of the embroidered dragon to the one in Father's dream.

I stayed over fifty days in the detached palace. During that time I was often favored by visits from the lady-in-waiting sent by the Three Majesties to inquire after my welfare. On each occasion, at the wishes of the Three Majesties, my family was invited to visit me, and they were treated with hospitality. A visit by a lady-in-waiting was fol-

lowed by the appearance of officials from the Ministry of Rites, who brought a table and wine cups. . . .

On the ninth day of the first month [February 21, 1744] I was invested as crown princess; the state marriage was scheduled for the eleventh. My separation from Father and Mother was nearing. I could no longer control my feelings and cried the whole day long. Father and Mother were sad and worried but managed to hold their composure. "When the daughter of a subject marries into the royal house," Father warned, "her family wins royal favor and her house flourishes. But when the family flourishes, disaster is sure to follow. Our house has enjoyed great favor for generations because my ancestor married a princess. Having enjoyed royal favor, I cannot shrink from boiling water or scorching fire. Still, for a lowly scholar to become overnight the father-in-law of the heir apparent—this is not a portent of happiness but the beginning of disaster. From this day on I will live in fear and anxiety, not knowing when I will die." Father instructed me in even the smallest aspects of my daily conduct. "Respectfully serve the Three Majesties and discharge your filial duties. Be helpful to the heir apparent with right actions and always be cautious in your speech. Add luster to the good fortune of your family and your kingdom." Though Father's exhortations on the last day ran to thousands of words, I listened with respect. But I could not keep back my tears. Even the trees and stones must have been touched by my grief!

After the marriage ceremony, Father and Mother continued their admonitions, which I heeded with respect. Father wore the deep-red official robes and cap of one who has passed the civil service examination. Mother wore her large ceremonial wig and the dress with the lime top and violet collar. All our kinsmen came to bid me farewell, and the palace was surging with guests. Every movement of Father and Mother conformed to the rules of propriety, and their deportment was grave and correct. Everyone said, "The kingdom has gained exemplary in-laws."